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ABSTRACT

This information packet contains nine articles that outline current trends in kindergarten retention/exclusion and their negative impact on student outcomes, particularly for high risk students. The 1980s saw increasing numbers of children required to repeat kindergarten, attend a transitional grade before first grade, or wait an extra year before starting school. Disproportionate numbers of these children have not attended preschool or are male, young compared to classmates, or members of minority groups. Advocates believe that kindergarten retention prevents school failure caused by immaturity and, thus, is different from retention in later grades. However, research findings reveal that kindergarten retention has the same negative effects as later retention: low self-esteem, poor attitudes toward school, and increased risk of becoming a high school dropout. In addition, controlled studies that followed retained children as far as the fifth grade found that they performed no better academically than "unready" children whose parents had insisted on promotion. The increasing academic demands of kindergarten and first grade are inconsistent with the normal development of 5- and 6-year-olds. Ironically, retention and exclusion, intended to protect children from inappropriate expectations, actually contribute to the escalation of demands, thereby placing more children at risk. As the average age and experience of kindergarten students rise, teachers find it difficult to teach to the normal 5-year-olds in the class. Administrators respond by advancing the cutoff date for school entrance. A more developmentally appropriate curriculum is needed in the early grades. (SV)

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KINDERGARTEN RETENTION

(Kindergarten Retention, Exclusion, Transition classes and Testing)

In this information packet you will find:

The Grade Retention/Dropout Connection

No Benefits from Kindergarten Retention

Kindergarten: The Best Year(s) of Your Life

Transition Classes: A Viable Alternative for the At-Risk Child?

Kindergarten Retention Issues (ICC Report)

Scenarios for Role Play on Grade Retention

What Doesn't Work: Explaining Policies of Retention in the Early Grades

Getting Tough

Flunking Kindergarten: Escalating Curriculum Leaves Many Behind

Bibliography

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• Spring 1991 •

THE GRADE RETENTION/DROPOUT CONNECTION

Are dropouts, high risk students and behavior problems being created in Kindergarten? Research suggests that grade retention may be creating problems which will affect students and teachers five and ten years later.

Every year some students in classrooms around the country will be retained. Usually the teacher will decide which students. Most of these students are retained at the primary level: kindergarten, first and second grades, for reasons such as immaturity, lack of readiness skills, behavior, and size.

Maria Gutierrez is being retained in Kindergarten this year. Last year Maria was very shy and did not talk much throughout the year. Maria had never used scissors (her mother did not allow her to) and she did not know all of her alphabet when she entered Kindergarten for the first time. At home Maria is a very normal child and in fact she often helps care for her 3 year old brother. With other children Maria appears to be as alert and active as her playmates and she often emerges as leader. School tests show her to be of average intelligence, despite the fact that testing may be somewhat skewed by the fact that Maria is bilingual.

When the teacher informed Maria's parents that she was to be retained, she did not say it was due to English language development or inability to perform the required Kindergarten tasks (often uncited reasons for retention), she merely said that Maria was immature, and small for her age and that she felt she would benefit from another year in Kindergarten.

What Maria's teacher did not say and probably does not know is that:

1) **Maria's chances of dropping out of school have just been increased by 50% because she is being retained.**

2) **There is no research data to indicate that retaining Maria will in any way improve her educational performance.**

3) **The psychological impact of retention is definitely negative for Maria, and estimates are that next to parent divorce this is considered the most traumatic of common events that could happen to Maria.**

Holding students back, or grade retention, once a commonly accepted strategy in the public school system is now under attack. New studies confirm what has been suspected for the last 5 years. At best retention is not effective and provides no benefit to students, and at worst retention is destructive to the academic and emotional growth of children, particularly minority and LEP children.

Retention is not academically sound. Studies indicate that within two years of retention any gain shown by a retained student diminishes. In that time the equivalent student who is not retained exceeds the retained student in academic growth. Logically, if we ask ourselves what happens to students when they are retained we can begin to understand better the negative results of these studies.

1) Students who are retained must repeat the same coursework that they have failed once. If they were not able to comprehend the subjects the way they were taught once, they will probably not respond to the same approach a second time.

2) In addition, even if students fail, they still learn something. In fact, percentage scores indicate that failing students fail with grades at the 50 and 60% levels, indicating that these students have passed and understood 50% to 60% of the work. Thus having them repeat this material wastes everyone's time, and takes away from time that could be used to help them master what they did not accomplish.

3) Students learn from one another. Retention places a student with others who are below his academic level in most areas, thus retained students have fewer peers to learn from.

4) Students have different modes of learning, meaning that they may learn best by working with models, by listening, reading, writing drawing or explaining something to others. In addition some students need to see the whole picture of what they are doing, and others are content to focus on the details. An individual teacher will teach primarily in the mode in which he or she is most comfortable, and this may not be an approach that is easy for some of the students to understand. Therefore a change in academic environment, rather than another year in the same class will often cause immediate improvement.

Emotionally, retention causes students trauma which interferes with learning. Retention is compared in one study with the death of a parent in the degree of emotional stress. Other studies report students to feel "sad" and "upset". Even in kindergarten where much retention takes place, children are aware that

(continued

Grade Retention, continued from page 3

they have failed and lose status at home and among their peers. Children who have brothers and sisters very near to them in age experience a loss of status in their families as well as at school, since younger siblings may now be ahead of them in school.

Retention may be even more destructive to the progress of minorities than to other children. Many children that are held back because of lack of maturity may be being penalized for different cultural traditions which may teach different behaviors and skills at home. Often minority children baby sit and shop, but have never used scissors (frequently a criterion for kindergarten readiness). Language development is another reason students are retained, especially at the primary levels. Since primary teachers provide more language development activities, these students are expected to benefit more from instruction at the lower grade level. However, students at the lower grade level also have lower language development, so the retained child is confined to an environment where less language is spoken daily.

Children from non-English speaking families are especially harmed by kindergarten retention, and kindergarten rejection. When children are sent home to mature for one more year, they have one more year without exposure to English. Likewise, when they are retained in kindergarten they receive only half a day of English (or instruction of any kind) for a second year, instead of the full day of instruction and exposure to English that is offered in first grade.

Are Dropouts Created in Kindergarten? A recent study of minority youth shows a direct correlation between the dropout rate and numbers of students that have been retained. Students who have been retained once are believed to have a 50% greater chance of dropping out. Students who have been retained twice have a 90% greater chance of dropping out than their peers who have been promoted. By 11th and 12th grade there are considerably fewer over-aged students in school than in lower grades, because they have already dropped out.

Retention does not accomplish what it is purported to achieve. Students do not improve as a result of retention. In fact, they will achieve at a slower rate than students with the same test scores and grades who are promoted.

Now, the imperative falls on schools and classroom teachers to prove that their plans to retain students will be successful, despite the data indicating that retention does not help. Those who continue to retain pupils do so despite evidence showing the potential for negative effects. The burden of proof now must fall on the school to justify retention.

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No Benefits from Kindergarten Retention

(Published in *VISIONS* Volume I/1 January 1991)

"The...1980s saw a rise in the number of children asked to repeat kindergarten. ...as many as 50 percent were held back in some areas. An extra year...is offered...in: transition classrooms before 1st grade, developmental kindergarten before kindergarten, and straight repeating of kindergarten. According to its advocates, kindergarten retention, because it is intended to prevent school failure caused by immaturity, is different from retention in later grades.

"Controlled studies do not support the benefits claimed for extra-year programs, however. Negative side effects occur just as they do for retention in later grades. In a review of 16 controlled studies on the effects of extra-year programs, the predominant finding is one of "no difference" (Shepard 1989). For example, when researchers followed extra-year children to the end of 1st grade or as far as 5th grade and compared their performance to unready children whose parents refused the extra year, the extra-year children performed no better academically despite being a year older for their grade. The conclusion of "no benefit" holds true for immaturity or for academic risk, and even where a special transition curriculum was offered rather than repeating regular kindergarten.

"Although...teachers believe that retention in kindergarten does not carry a social stigma "if handled properly," extra-year children are more likely to have lower self-concepts and poorer attitudes toward school... (Shepard 1989). Parent interviews reveal both short-term and long term distress associated with retention such as teasing by peers, tears because friends are going on, and references years later like, "If I had only been able ..., I would be in 3rd grade now." (Shepard and Smith 1989).

"...(The) increasingly narrow academic demands in kindergarten and 1st grade...long periods of seat work, work sheets, and "staying in the lines" that are required of children, (are) inconsistent with the normal development of 5- and 6-year-olds. Ironically, retention and holding children out of school, intended to protect them from inappropriate expectations, actually contribute to the escalation of demands, thereby

placing more and more children at risk. As kindergarten becomes populated with 6-year-olds who have had 3 years of preschool, teachers find it difficult to teach to the normal 5-year-olds in the class. The problem can only be solved with more developmentally appropriate curriculum in the early grades... Until this problem of kindergarten retention is addressed...(it) will negatively affect the quality of education at every level of schooling."

From Educational Leadership, Shepard and Smith, May 1990, p.87

SCM/PB (04/91)

KINDERGARTEN: THE BEST YEAR(S) OF YOUR LIFE

Kindergarten Retention, Exclusion, Transition classes and Testing

How can children fail in school before they have begun? If the American educational system espouses universal access to education, can it reject a child before the first legal year of school (first grade) even begins?

Even for the youngest children the school system has created many roadblocks to success. Still widely practiced are:

- Kindergarten entry testing resulting in exclusion from kindergarten or tracking;
- Retention in kindergarten;
- Assignment to additional grades such as prekindergarten, and/or transition.

As a result some systems offer up to four years of schooling to complete the first grade.

The prognosis for children that begin their education with these roadblocks is grim. A child who is one year overage for her grade level, no matter whether excluded, retained or placed in transition programs, has a 50% greater chance of dropping out of school. A child who is two years behind his peers has a 90% greater chance of dropping out.

Why do we retain or exclude children? Most reasons given by teachers and administrators fall into one of four categories:

1) Maturity: The child is immature relative to his peers

2) Remediation: The child is academically and/or socially behind her peers

3) Motivation: The child is not working and needs to be held back is an incentive to himself or others.

4) Homogeneity: The child will be unable to function at the next level because the child is below the achievement level of her peers.

Grade retention does not "fix" any of these problems. Neither does promotion. Time resolves some problems. In other cases intervention will be necessary to address them. Grade retention will do no more for a child exhibiting these problems than will promotion. In either

case the problems will probably remain, unless resolved in another manner.

However, grade retention, has been shown to be consistently successful in accomplishing two things:

Grade retention <u>does</u>:

1) lower self esteem
2) increase the chances of dropping out

Although there is no data *supporting* grade retention, it is still a common practice, especially in the primary years. In some areas as many as 50% of migrant children are retained in kindergarten. Nationally 33% of migrant children are retained before second grade. Why?

Retention provides no comparison:

There is, in fact, no way to compare the effects of promotion and retention on one child. A retained child may mature, learn more, and appear to catch up with his peers. However, if this same student had been promoted, he would also have matured and learned without having risked the long term liabilities of retention. Children are keenly aware of retention as failure. Retained children experience a loss of self esteem and often carry the scar for life. Moreover the child has "lost" a year of his life, and is more likely to dropout at 16, 17 or 18 when he feels too old and graduation is still too far away.

Kindergarten exclusion/readiness:

The requirement that children be ready for kindergarten relieves the school of the responsibility to meet a variety of developmental needs that children may exhibit. Children come as they are to school. The child who is designated "not ready" for kindergarten will be sent home to an environment (which evidently is not promoting maturation or readiness) to mature more. Whatever behaviors the school is seeking have not been developed at home and probably will not be developed in another year there. This strategy excludes the child for another year from opportunities to socialize with peers, use language, and experience and manipulate a varied environment for another year.

Testing:

Many tests used for kindergarten exclusion are diagnostic tests designed to help teachers teach more effectively. They are not designed to track or exclude children. Many of these tests are culturally biased with norms based on a high social economic group. These tests have been found to have no better than a 50% accuracy rate in predicting school success. Testing should be used for diagnosis and program planning. Any testing that does not include observation and dialogue with family and childcare givers, should be looked upon with suspicion. The use of tests to exclude or track children at the primary level is in conflict with the basic goal of universal access to education as well as with good educational practices.

Transition Programs:

Many **transition programs** appear to be effective because they provide developmentally appropriate practices and promote confidence and success in the children. Transition classes however, unnecessarily add a year to schooling producing the same net effects as retention, the lowering of self esteem and increased dropout rates. The developmentally appropriate curriculum they are using should be used for all students in this age group. In addition, their (short term) success prevents schools from adopting a schoolwide developmentally appropriate program for all children.

Change:

It may seem difficult to change attitudes toward retention at the kindergarten level, however it is at this level that the best solutions for the problems created by learning differences can be found. Districts that have adopted schoolwide developmentally appropriate practices from kindergarten (or preschool) through second grade are overjoyed with the results. According to teachers, previously unresolvable learning differences melt away, all children feel capable and can succeed and the experiential curriculum provides challenges to all children.

Susan C. Morse, San Diego C.O.E., for the National Preschool Coordination Project, 1991.

SCM/PB (04/91)

Transition Classes:
A Viable Alternative for the At-Risk Child?

Increased interest in the child "not ready" for reading has led to the use of a number of instructional options, of which the transition class is one. Efficacy of transition room programs is reviewed and importance of teacher attitudes is discussed. Educators will need to examine current educational practices in order to reduce the school failure rate.

Conclusions

- Analysis of the research studies of transition rooms raises questions about the degree of educational "payoff" obtained with such programs. Research indicates that transition room children either do not perform as well or at most are equal in achievement levels to transition room-eligible children placed in regular classrooms.
- Attitudes of school personnel toward the transition room generally are favorable; yet few, if any, schools have gathered any date to indicate the educational status of children so placed. Statements of faith from school personnel abound. Few programs maintain effective monitoring systems to indicate the progress of the children.
- Although a small teacher/student ration often exists in the transition room, some research indicates that less time is devoted to academic activities than is given to children who are eligible for the transition room but are placed in the regular class.
- Almost all research investigations, regardless of the statistical findings, emphasize the importance of further educational intervention within the regular class for the educationally at-risk child.
- It is possible to make changes in transition room programs to meet educational and legal objections, and such changes must be considered carefully by school personnel if a transition room is to continue to be used.
- Approaches other than the use of the transition room should be considered by school personnel. Several investigations have demonstrated that changes in the operation of the kindergarten program have resulted in impressive educational gains for children at that age level.

Summary of article written by Gilbert R. Gredler, that appeared in the Psychology in the Schools, Volume 24, October 1984.

SCM/PB (04/91)

Kindergarten Retention Issues

Problems/Needs:

• Guidelines for school system - Schools do not have policies, retention is often last resort and arbitrary.

• Attendance requirements - Many schools have requirements for minimum number of days in attendance in any year in order to be promoted. These penalize migrant students.

• Language - Language differences prevent parent-teacher communication and often create an excuse for grade retention. Children that are given standardized tests in their second language fall short and are then retained because of low test scores.

• Parents lack knowledge of the effects of retention as well as of school program, policies and parental options regarding retention.

• The school system does not exhibit a willingness to work with the parents to remediate problems and prevent retention.

• Teachers may try to protect students from failure in the next more difficult grade by retaining them.

Solutions:

1- Provide information on retention including the pros and cons of retention and the sources, provide bibliography.

2- Educate parents, and home visitors to know their options, and rights. Provide advocates for parents, stress the meaning and importance of report cards, insist on early notification of problems and plans for improvement from the school.

3- Provide an 800 # for retention issues that parents could call if they have questions or need help.

4- Provide a readable pamphlet in English and Spanish for parents about the effects of retention.

5- Tests should not be the only measure for kindergarten entry or promotion. If testing is used, assure that the tests for preschoolers and entering kindergarteners are in the home language, that tests are appropriate and valid. Assure that the home environment, testing atmosphere (child's emotional state), are considered with test results.

Charleen Pierce, Shirley Holder and Dorothy Yank, members of the Interstate Coordination Committee for NPCP.

SCM/PB (03/21/91)

Scenarios for Role Play on Grade Retention

"A"	"B"
1) The Migrant Director of a local education agency believes that children who are socially or emotionally immature should be held back from starting school until they are more ready. He has read different literature on this but feels the researchers are more psychologists and administrators not "grass roots" educators so they don't know what is going on. He believes it hurts to retain until 3rd grade.	An Early Childhood teacher feels that students should not be retained and that the research done is valid and proves this. Also, research on the dropouts and students at risk shows that a year over age is a definite characteristic of students in trouble.
2) A kindergarten teacher wants a LEP student to repeat. She says he is small for his age and needs extra time to master the basics of kindergarten.	The advocate recommends that the student be promoted to first grade.
3) A migrant parent brings her child to school to register for kindergarten. The secretary and the Kindergarten teacher have convinced her that the child is too young and to wait for a year.	The advocate discovers that the child is old enough for kindergarten by one month. The advocate talks to _____ (parent, secretary and/or teacher) about the problem.

SCM/PB (03/91)

"What Doesn't Work: Explaining Policies of Retention in the Early Grades", Smith & Shephard, Phi Delta Kappan, October 1987

1) If any trend could be said to grow even as we watch, it would be the move away from what has been called "social promotion": the current increase in policies that permit the retention of young children for a second year in a given grade.

2) ...we estimate an overall retention rate of 15% to 19%. At this rate,, retention practices in the U.S. most closely resemble those in such countries as Haiti and Sierra Leone.

3) The consistent conclusion of such reviews is that children make progress during the year in which they repeat a grade, but not as much progress as similar children who were promoted.

4) Pupils who are retained pay with a year of their lives. No matter how sensitively teachers and parents handle the retention, the children understand that they are being taken from their agemates because of some failure.

5) Males and pupils who are relatively young or small for their grade are more likely than others to be retained.

6) Clearly, a major contradiction exists between the policies of school reformers and the available evidence.

7) ...the child who is retained often makes achievement gains during the second year in grade. But the information to which the teachers have personal access is incomplete and misleading. Jimmy, alike in many respects to Johnny, is promoted. Perhaps he struggles a little, but he makes it. By the time the two boys are halfway through elementary school, their performance and adjustment are indistinguishable.

8) ...teachers we labeled "remediationists"...viewed all children legally eligible for school as teachable, if they are given enough appropriate opportunities at home and in the classroom.

9) Low-retaining schools had a preponderance of remediationist teachers who looked for alternative means for solving the problem of "unready" pupils.

10) When the curriculum is taken for granted as correct, the child who does not keep pace is labeled as a failure.

11) When reading becomes accepted as a natural part of kindergarten, those children without the advantages of early instruction at home or in preschool or for whom ...reading instruction comes too soon are likely candidates for retention.

12) As we have reported elsewhere, the relatively youngest child in a classroom achieves slightly lower than the oldest child. About nine percentile ranks separate the oldest from the youngest on first-grade tests.

13) Thus children of working-class or poor families are more likely to be the ones retained, while the children of upwardly mobile families will receive at least a temporary boost.

14) ...the first grade teacher rejects the raw material, the product of an earlier point on the assembly line, so that he or she will not be held responsible for a subsequent malfunction.

15) The evidence is quite clear and nearly unequivocal that the achievement and adjustment of retained children are no better - and in most instances are worse - than those of comparable children who are promoted.

16) In particular, teachers in the low-retaining schools taught us about the possibilities of managing heterogeneity without the need to sort, label, track, and retain - all practices that may meet the needs of the system, but fail to address the needs of the students.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 1988
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Getting Tough

Schools Start Flunking Many More Students In Drive on Mediocrity

Kindergartners Fail to Make The Grade in Some Places; Bitter Controversy Ensues

Disbelief, Shame and Tears

By Gary Putka
Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

Kindergarten has suddenly become a very serious affair. Five-year-old underperformers are flunking it.

They are becoming hostages, of sorts, in a war on mediocrity in America's schools. While parents and educators debate the merits of flunking, schools in many places are employing it as a weapon as rarely before. From kindergarten to high school, especially across the South and in big cities elsewhere, students at all grade levels are failing to be promoted at the highest rates in years.

In Charleston, S.C., the rate is about 20% of enrollment; in Baltimore, 14%; and in Philadelphia, 12%. A Chicago school last year planned to demote or fail some 60% of its students before parental pressure forced a retreat. Census figures for 1986, the latest available, show 27% of U.S. children were a year or more behind in school in the seventh grade, up from 20% in 1976.

'Punitive Mind-Set'

A binge of legislative educational reform since the mid-1970s has encouraged the spread of the practice. Most states have created policies and standards that make it tougher to advance poor-performing children and easier to retain or demote them. Flunking has also spread in response to the support that businessmen have offered for higher school taxes—in exchange for higher standards and greater accountability for performance.

" 'Standards' has become a code word for retaining kids, and school districts have a much more punitive mind-set," says Ernest House, an education professor at the University of Colorado. "The result is a lot more failure."

Supporters of non-promotion argue it is helping to restore discipline to a national school system gone soft. In this atmosphere, the practice of promoting underperformers to avoid damage to their self-esteem, or "social promotion," has fallen into disfavor.

"We went through an era where school psychologists said 'don't retain children who are behind, it's better for them to be passed on," says William Mangum, who helped raise Georgia's promotion standards as chairman of the education committee in the state's House of Representatives. "Well, we just about wrecked a school system that way."

Does It Work?

Not surprisingly, flunking has become the subject of bitter debate. Although flunking purports to motivate the slow student, a growing body of research suggests it does not; it may merely encourage more older students to drop out. Critics of flunking also assert that it is used more against minority-group students than white students and that it can devastate any child's social and emotional well-being.

"There is little reason to expect that the increase in retentions will result in an overall rise in accomplishment with the long-term promise of national economic revival," say education researchers Lorrie Shepard and Mary Lee Smith in a book to be published soon. "In fact, the evidence . . . suggests the opposite."

There is no dissension on one point: Flunking is strong medicine. For students, it's the ultimate educational shock. "There were tears," says Jennifer Nelson, a Des Moines mother whose son Scott is making his second try at the third grade this year. In Des Moines, holding a child back to repeat a grade requires the consent of parents, and Mrs. Nelson gave hers. "He wanted to move along with his classmates. He said, 'Don't do this to me, Mom.' "

Shattered Hopes

But Mrs. Nelson says she made the right decision. She says that Scott's grades have improved and that he "doesn't hide his light under a bushel anymore" as his confidence has grown in class.

For many other parents, especially those who had no say in the matter, flunking has meant shattered hopes. "When you get that little notice saying Johnny won't be going on to fourth grade, there's a feeling of disappointment, of disbelief," says Paul Smith, research director for the Children's Defense Fund in Washington. "It's a terrible shock."

It's particularly so now that kindergartners—and even *pre*-kindergartners—are being flunked because of poor performance on standard tests. In the Norwood-Norfolk school district in New York state, Shannon Liebfred was denied admission to regular kindergarten and retained in a pre-kindergarten class on the basis of a test published by the Gesell Institute for Human Development in New Haven.

Shannon's parents filed a complaint with the state department of education. The complaint was settled when the school district reinstated her in regular kindergarten.

Expert testimony against the test helped her case. In one part of the test, children are asked to complete an unfinished human stick figure. They lose points by drawing a navel, or by drawing arms perpendicular, rather than at a narrow angle, to the body. The test interprets such esthetic liberties as signs of immaturity. Gesell estimates that 18% of the nation's school districts employ the test.

More than at any other grade level, flunking in kindergarten has provoked resistance, and nowhere more so than in Georgia. Rigor-minded lawmakers like Mr. Mangum enacted Georgia's Quality Basic Education Act in 1985. It requires standard multiple-choice tests in kindergartens and nine other grades. Though the test scores alone don't determine whether a child flunks, they are important factors.

The tests helped flunk 100,000 Georgia students last year, 9.5% of enrollment, a big increase from the 6.5% rate at the beginning of the decade.

About 7,400 kindergartners were among those who flunked the test, although how many actually were held back isn't yet known. A child in a Fulton County school was flunked despite good test results. His parents lost a suit in state court, where a judge ruled that promotion decisions were a school prerogative.

Fighting the Test

A coalition of school groups—including the Georgia School Boards Association, the Georgia Congress of Parents and Teachers and the Georgia Association of Elementary School Principals—has urged the state to drop the kindergarten test. These groups say it is unreliable and puts too much pressure on toddlers.

"It's bringing high stress to children, it's driving the curriculum inappropriately in many cases, and it's not telling us anything that we want to know or need to know," says Judy Jefferson, child-development director for the Winnette County public schools. "What's more, it's costing the taxpayers lots of money."

The Georgia test, a version of McGraw-Hill Inc.'s California Achievement Test, contains 64 items and is typically given in one sitting of about 90 minutes. The test is divided into three sections: visual recognition, sound recognition and mathematics. Teachers read questions aloud to the children, who must choose their answers from several pictures, letters or numerals printed on answer sheets.

Although the test questions are confidential, the state department of education makes available a list of questions, prepared by McGraw-Hill, that are similar to questions on the test. In one example are pictures of a vase, a fan and a bicycle. The teacher's script: "Look at the pictures, the vase, the fan and the bike. Find the picture whose name begins like 'find.' "

In higher grades, partly out of embarrassment and partly out of a sense of hopelessness, parents have usually accepted the flunking of their children without re-

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sisting. As the practice spreads, however, more parents are getting angry.

Last year, Tamika Thomas scored below grade-level in reading on a standardized achievement test given at Beethoven elementary, her inner-city Chicago school. In February, her mother, Cynthia Thomas, received a letter from Beethoven saying she would be demoted a year to the third grade; 500 of Beethoven's 850 students faced similar news.

A parents' boycott and appeal to the local superintendent forced the school to back off from some demotion decisions, but Tamika and many other students were failed last June anyway.

"I want her transferred out of that school," says Mrs. Thomas. "It's taken away her self-esteem. She doesn't feel good about herself. She's big for her age, and other kids pick on her. She needs help, and she's not getting it."

An Issue in Boston

Educational watchdog groups in New York City, Boston and Philadelphia say they're fighting many school-level battles on behalf of parents who claim their children were flunked unfairly. Their challenges to flunking often assert that the schools failed to help slow learners sufficiently and that, without remedial instruction, repeating a grade is pointless.

"It's turning into a hot issue," says Anne Wheelock, of the Massachusetts Advocacy Center in Boston. Since Boston started tougher new promotion policies in 1984, Ms. Wheelock's group has been pressing the system to ease up.

Boston retained 10.5% of its students last year, the advocacy center says, down from the previous year's 11.4%. But Ms. Wheelock says the rate remains much higher than it was in the late 1970s. For black and Hispanic students, the rate hovers around 13%. It is 9.4% for white children. It is no longer difficult to find junior high schools with more over-aged students than those in the normal grade for their age.

"Take a look around," says Cindy Laba, a youth worker, one busy Friday night at the Boys and Girls Club in heavily Irish, working-class South Boston. "Everyone here has been held back at least once." To prove her point, she collars the nearest two boys, in the sixth grade. They sheepishly acknowledge they are both a year behind.

Not-So-Great Expectations

Maureen Kelley, who spends some of her free time at the club, flunked twice in the past five years. Now in the ninth grade, she is 16, while most of her classmates are 14 or 15.

Earlier in grade school, she says, she worked hard, enjoyed mathematics and sometimes earned A's and B's. But she says her grades and attendance have suffered because she has moved around Boston a lot, living with various relatives, and now makes many D's and F's.

"I used to love school, [but] not anymore," she says. Once she dreamed of college and becoming a doctor. Now, she says, "I can't be one. No good college would take me."

Some education analysts think that widespread flunking will sharply increase the dropout rate, already high in many big cities. There's no doubt that students who are held back drop out more frequently, in some places at twice the rate of students who never flunk.

Advocates of higher school standards are unimpressed. They see poor achievement, not flunking, as the root cause both of flunking and of dropping out. Yet Ms. Shepard and other researchers have found that even among students with similar achievement levels, those who are flunked leave school more often than those who are passed.

Until recently, Jose Cirino was a junior at Boston High School, where he hoped to graduate as a first step to becoming a lawyer. Having failed two grades, Mr. Cirino says he would have "felt funny graduating next year at 19." He dropped out last month to work part time as a shoe salesman. He now wants to become a policeman but will have to obtain a high-school graduate equivalence degree to do so.

Mr. Cirino acknowledges that his academic career was mixed. At times he earned good grades, but he also was suspended several times for misbehavior. In the end, he says, he simply gave up.

Flunking is costly, amounting to several thousands of dollars a year for each student flunked. A 1980 study put the national cost at some $5 billion, a number that can only have grown with the rise in flunking and per-pupil expenditures. Remedial schooling, by contrast, typically costs no more than $500 per student, say Ms. Jefferson and other critics of flunking.

Higher Test Scores

Critics assert that the importance attached to standard tests has encouraged schools to flunk students. In response to the new state education laws—many of which reward or punish school personnel for students' test scores—school systems have striven mightily to increase scores.

When Gary Gottfredson, an education researcher at Johns Hopkins University, examined improved scores in the Charleston, S.C., schools, he found that much of the gain was caused by flunking. In reading, 78% of Charleston's eighth-graders met the state's minimum test standard in 1986, up from 48% in 1981. But Mr. Gottfredson found that many of the students in the 1986 sample would have been ninth-, 10th- or even 11th-graders had they not flunked.

If Charleston compared the performance of students of the same age from year to year, Mr. Gottfredson says, the schools might show no improvement. Researchers have drawn similar conclusions in Atlanta and Kansas City. Johns Hopkins is advising Charleston on a program to reduce its 20% or so flunking rate.

FLUNKING KINDERGARTEN: ESCALATING CURRICULUM LEAVES MANY BEHIND

BY LORRIE A. SHEPARD AND MARY LEE SMITH

NEXT YEAR Michael Lee will repeat kindergarten because he flunked the Georgia readiness test for first grade. Judging from his fidgety behavior and inability to cope with scissors and other fine-motor tasks, his teacher confirmed that Michael Lee could benefit from another year before going on to first. Across the country the practice of kindergarten retention for many children like Michael Lee is increasing dramatically. In some districts, 10%, 25%, 33%, or as many as 60% of kindergartners are judged to be unready for the academic rigors of first grade. Unready children are provided alternative programming: developmental kindergarten (followed by regular kindergarten), transition or pre-first grade, or repeating kindergarten.

An extra year before first grade is intended to protect unready children from entering too soon into a demanding academic environment where, it is thought, they will almost surely experience failure. Depending on the philosophical basis of kindergarten retention, which differs profoundly from one district to the next, the extra year is meant either to be a time for immature children to grow and develop learning readiness or a time to work on deficient prereading skills.

The advocates of kindergarten retention are undoubtedly well intentioned. They see retention as a way for the school to respond to the enormous differences in background experiences, developmental stages, and aptitudes of the young children who present themselves at the schoolhouse door. They view it as a policy that has the child's best interests at heart and as a means, as they would put it, to prevent failure before it occurs. The question is: Are they right? Is kindergarten retention a helpful remedy for the problems it is intended to address?

For the past four years we have conducted research on the issues surrounding kindergarten retention: What are current practices? What problems are encountered by children who are youngest in their grade? How accurate are the tests used for screening? What are the effects of extra-year programs? What are the differences in school cultures that account for low incidence of retention in one school and high incidence in the next?

In this article we summarize three of our major findings: 1) Kindergarten retention does nothing to boost subsequent academic achievement. 2) Regardless of what it is called, the extra year creates a social stigma. 3) And most ironically, the practice of kindergarten retention actually fosters the problem it was intended to solve—it feeds the escalation of inappropriate academic demand in first grade.

We have been able to locate 14 controlled studies that document the effects of kindergarten retention: 6 studies that were included in Gredler's 1984 major review of the research on transition rooms and 8 newly identified empirical studies.[1] The dominant finding is one of no difference. Gredler concluded that at-risk children, promoted to first grade, achieved as well or better than children who spent an extra year in transition rooms. The additional studies we located confirmed Gredler's conclusion. Children who spend an extra year in transition rooms are no better off at the end of first grade than comparable children who were recommended to repeat but whose parents refused.

In the study we conducted in Colorado, extra-year children were matched with control children on sex (mostly boys), birth month (mostly near the entrance-age cutoff), and measured readiness at the start of kindergarten. Measured at the end of first grade, there was again no difference on standardized math scores or on teacher ratings of reading and math achievement, learner self-concept, social maturity, and attention span. The only significant result was on standardized reading scores, where the retained children were only one month ahead of promoted children. These no-difference findings are surprising considering that by this time the retained children were a year older and had had an additional year of schooling compared to the control children who began equally at risk. That is, each group of children was tested at the end of first grade. But by the time the retained children were tested, they had had two years of kindergarten and one year of first grade, as compared to one year of kindergarten and one year of first grade for the promoted children.

When parents are asked to agree to retention or transition placement they are often told that, given the

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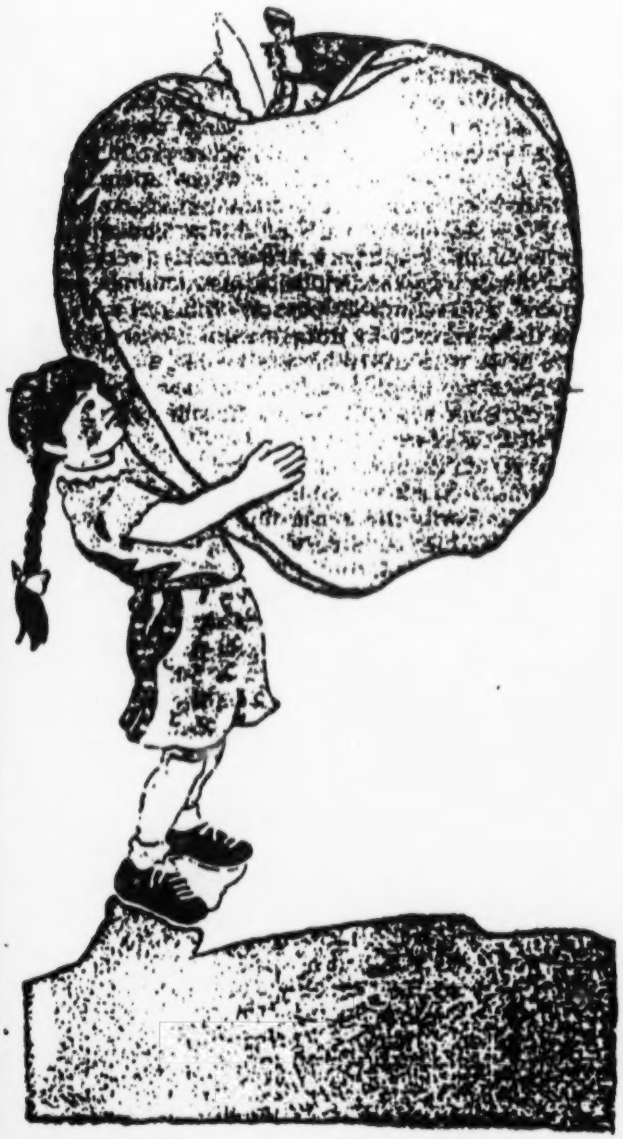

ILLUSTRATED BY BOBBI TILL

extra year to grow, their children will move to the top of their class and become leaders. Research evidence from controlled studies does not support this claim.

How could there be such a discrepancy between research findings and the practical experience of many teachers who watch children blossom and grow during their transition year? For example, a study conducted by Dr. Judith Ford in Norman, Okla., is often cited by the Gesell Institute to support its advocacy of extra-year programs.[2] During their year in transition class, the 27 children in the Norman program gained an average of *55 percentile points* on the Metropolitan Readiness Test. Thus children who were in the bottom half of their class at the end of one year of kindergarten were remarkably more ready after an extra year, now with readiness scores more like those of their more mature peers who had gone directly on to first grade.

Though many cite findings such as these as convincing, this study is fatally flawed. As is typical of studies cited by transition advocates, the Norman study had no control groups, which would have been critical in determining what those children would have been like if they had been promoted rather than retained or placed in transition. Nor were children in the Norman study followed up in first grade. Studies with control groups consistently show that gains such as these in readiness *do not persist into the next grade.* Eventually children end up at approximately the same percentile rank compared to their new grade peers as they would have been had they stayed with their age peers. Young or at-risk students who are promoted perform equally well in first grade.

Kindergarten teachers, however, are generally unaware of these end results. They know only that the retained children are doing better than they did in their first year of kindergarten. In the short run, teachers see progress: longer attention spans, better compliance with classroom rules, and success with paper-and-pencil tasks that were a struggle the year before. Furthermore, many of the transition children are above-average achievers in their first grade class (but, unseen by their teachers, so are an equal number of the matched control children). Some of the transition children are still acting out and doing poorly with worksheets (as are an equal number of control children). After retention has been tried and children are a year older than their classmates, disruptive behaviors that were once thought to be signs

of immaturity are now seen as relatively enduring personality traits.

For these few transitory academic benefits, retained children pay with a year of their lives. And, they understand that they could not go on with their classmates because of something that was *wrong with them.* Many educators believe there is no stigma attached to kindergarten retention, especially if it is "handled properly" by parents. Many especially deny that transition placement—which has a different name and does not involve recycling of curriculum—could be harmful. But children know that they are not making normal progress in the same way they know the meaning of placement in the bluebird reading group. One little girl understood the meaning of her pre-first placement so well that she thought she would also need to go to pre-second before second grade, and pre-third, and so on.

Our conclusion that kindergarten retention is traumatic and disruptive for children is based on interviews at the end of first grade with parents who had previously agreed to developmental or transition placements for their children. The majority of parents said that on balance the extra year had been the correct decision. Even if their children were doing poorly in first grade, they believed they were ahead of where they would have been without the extra year (and we did not tell them that the control group made equal progress). A majority of parents also reported significant negative emotional effects associated with the retention. The apparent contradiction was created by the substantial group in the middle who reported both positive and negative experiences.

Children know that they are not making normal progress in the same way they know the meaning of placement in the bluebird reading group.

The following quotations typify the ambivalent feelings of parents who gave a positive "vote" to the program but revealed an undercurrent of regret:

> I knew he was struggling and he knew that he wasn't doing what the other kids were doing so I thought this was right. He's OK now. He does refer back once in a while. He says, "If I would have made it through kindergarten, I would be in second grade instead of first."

> Well, the only [problem] was that he wasn't going to be going with the rest of his class into the next grade. But it was only because I told him that he was so special that his teacher wanted to keep him.

> I think the biggest drawback is the attitude of other children and adults. Not so much from the teachers, but parents of other children remarking on how he looks so much older, "he should be here," "he should be there," and other children picking up on the fact that he was going to remain in kindergarten, giving him a hard time about that.

> I think it was more of a social thing. It was really hard to explain to her that her friends would be going on and she wouldn't be. That was a real hard part of it. I think it helped her more than it hindered her.

> I personally think it's better that we've held her back and she has the possibility of being a little closer to the top than being a grade ahead and being at the very bottom. Some of the negative aspects of it are her own problems dealing with it and saying that she's been held back.

Kindergarten retention is similar in many respects to tracking and special education placements for mild learning problems. The logic of providing instruction tailored to individual learning needs is admirable, but research has not confirmed the efficacy of separate placements. Instead, research has documented negative side effects such as social stigma, lowered expectations, and watered-down instruction. From findings in these other literatures it is possible to speculate about why kindergarten retention does not produce the expected boost in academic achievement. For example, in a review of research on ability grouping, Robert Slavin found that homogeneously tracked classrooms are ineffective but that within-class groupings do improve learning.[3] He reasoned that within-class grouping for each subject provides a closer fit between student learning and instruction than does a one-time assignment to separate classes on the basis of ability. Similarly, we might reason that kindergarten retention is a very gross and inaccurate way to individualize instruction because it requires a 12-month dislocation. Children who are judged to be unready by three months are treated the same as those who are 12 months behind; a child who seems immature in only one area of development is treated the same as a child who suffers developmental lags in all areas of development.

Kindergarten retention also resembles tracking and special education placement in that a disproportionate number of minority children are selected for extra-year placements.[4] Thus, children who most rely on public education for the opportunity to learn are segregated from their peers on the basis of prior learnings.

Tests used to determine readiness are not sufficiently accurate to make their use for extra-year placements defensible. For example, Kaufman and Kaufman have provided the only reliability data on the widely used Gesell School Readiness Test.[5] They found a standard error of measurement equivalent to *six months*, meaning that a child measured to be four and one-half years old developmentally and unready for school could very likely be five and fully ready. Although various readiness tests are correlated with later school performance, predictive validities for all available tests are low enough that 30 to 50 percent or more of children said to be unready will be falsely identified.[6]

Over the long term, kindergarten retention has a final negative consequence. Children who are over age for their grade have a much greater likelihood of dropping out of school. The Association of California Urban School Districts reported that children failed in their first two years of school have substantially reduced chances of completing high school.[7] When background

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factors and achievement are taken into account, children who have been retained or are otherwise over age for their grade are 20 to 30 percent more likely to drop out.[8] These findings hold true in both rich and poor school districts.

THE CURRENT fad to flunk children in kindergarten is the product of inappropriate curriculum. Over the past 20 years there has been a persistent escalation of academic demand in kindergarten and first grade. What were formerly next-grade expectations are shoved downward into the lower grade. In a recent survey, 18 percent of principals reported that it is district policy to teach reading to all kindergartners; an additional 50 percent of schools teach reading to kindergartners who are "ready and able"; 85 percent of elementary principals say that academic achievement in kindergarten has medium or high priority in their schools.[9]

In a forthcoming article for the *Elementary School Journal*, we document the societal factors behind the escalation: universal availability of kindergartens, pervasiveness of preschool, and Sesame Street. If everyone has had kindergarten, then first grade teachers assume as prerequisites those letter sounds that previously were taught in first grade. If kindergartners already know their letters from Big Bird, then they must be taught something more, or so the argument goes. In addition, our interviews with teachers reveal more immediate sources of pressure: accountability gates in later grades and demands from middle-class parents that children move faster and faster along the track of pre-primers and graded workbooks. Schools with high rates of retention in kindergarten are characterized by an "accountability culture." Promotional gates at third grade or sixth grade are translated downward into fixed requirements for the end of first grade. If a first grade teacher is visited by the principal and reprimanded for any child who is below national norms on standardized tests, this teacher in turn communicates to the kindergarten teacher an unwillingness to accept children for first grade who are not ready to read.

Kindergarten teachers also describe the demands imposed by parents. Many middle-class parents visit school and convey that their only criterion for judging a teacher's effectiveness is her success in advancing their child's reading accomplishments. They ignore other evidence of enriching experience and cognitive development. "My child was reading when he came to school. You haven't taught him a thing." What counts for many parents is the number of first grade primers completed in kindergarten because this is a clearly quantifiable measure of progress, like an SAT score for a five-year-old.

More academics borrowed from the next grade is not necessarily better learning. A dozen national organizations, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the International Reading Association, and the National Association of Elementary School Principals, have issued position statements decrying the negative effects of narrow focus on literacy and numeracy in the earliest grades.[10] Long hours of drill-and-practice on isolated skills are detrimental to all children, even those who are able to meet the demands, because tiny, boring proficiencies learned by rote are substituted for conceptual understanding and enthusiasm for learning. Highly formalized activities that occur too early deprive children of time to learn from play, substitute inappropriate symbolic learning for manipulative learning, detach reading from normal language development, stifle natural exploration, and increase stress.[11] More seriously, fixed, higher standards injure at-risk pupils, causing many more children to fail who would have, in due course, done quite well. The clearest victims of inappropriate curriculum are the children who are judged inadequate by its standards, children who can't stay in the lines and sit still long enough.

Many kindergarten teachers acknowledge that extra-year programs would not be necessary if children were being sent on to a more flexible, child-centered first grade. But faced with what they expect will be a punishing experience for the child (and holding generally rosy opinions about the effects of retention), keeping the child in the safety of kindergarten is clearly preferred. Educators do not express awareness, however, that the practice of retention might actually contribute to the escalation of curriculum. The more that unready children are screened out of school or put in pre-K, the more that kindergarten becomes a place for six-year-olds. Teachers naturally adjust what they teach to the level of the children in their class. If many of the children are older and reading, teachers do not continue to teach as if the room were filled with five-year-olds. Likewise, as more and more "unready" children are removed, first grade becomes a place for seven-year-olds, and instruction is paced accordingly. The subtle adjustment of curricular expectations to the capabilities of an older, faster-moving group can be demonstrated in the research literature on school entrance ages.[12] Each time a district or state raises the cutoff date for school entry, the hope is to eliminate the youngest children who seem unready for school. In a very short time, instruction is adjusted to the new age range and a new youngest group appears inadequate.

One alternative to escalation, retention, and more escalation can be found in the schools we observed that practiced virtually no kindergarten retention. Instead of highly stratified curricula, strict promotion standards, and an insistence that teachers adhere rigidly to the authorized curriculum rather than exercising their creativity, these schools had developed a culture where teachers and principal shared a commitment to adapting curriculum and instructional practices to a wide range of individual differences. They were able to manage heterogeneity without the need to

sort, label, track, and retain. Although these non-retention schools were also very academic and teachers had goals for skill development in kindergarten, a child who was not yet proficient would not be failed. Instead there were cooperative understandings between teachers. The kindergarten teacher would begin at the child's level and move him along to the extent possible, and the first grade teacher would pick up where the kindergarten teacher left off. These schools also had more flexible between-grade arrangements. Children moved more freely across grade boundaries, as exemplified by cross-age tutoring or a child visiting the next-higher grade three hours a week for reading instruction.

We are told that all of our conclusions are credible except the implication that current practices can be changed.

Our observations indicated that the non-retention schools were neither richer nor poorer than those schools with rigid grade-level expectations; nor did they serve less diverse populations. It should also be noted that the more flexible and individualized arrangements in the non-retention schools did not come at the expense of higher standards. The average standardized achievement test scores for third graders in these schools were no different from those in the high-retaining schools that had become preoccupied with the accountability tests.

When these research findings are presented to groups of educators across the country, we are told that all of our conclusions are credible except the implication that current practices can be changed. A kindergarten teacher stands up in the audience and gives yet another account of what will happen to children who cannot keep pace in first grade. In a workshop for first grade teachers the story is told of the principal who visits each May, test scores in hand, seeking an explanation as to why several of the children are not above national norms. In a state conference of elementary principals, the principals point to their superintendents, who post standardized test scores by school. As long as each group feels powerless to intervene and persists in practices that contribute to the problem, the problem will get worse. More and more children like Michael Lee in Georgia will be told, in one of their earliest encounters with schooling, that they are inadequate.

The answer is still to be found in the schools with appropriate curriculum and collegial understandings among teachers and principal that make retention unnecessary. Once the larger context of curriculum escalation is understood, then perhaps groups of early-grade teachers and their principal will have greater incentive to resist the myriad pressures and reject the factory-model, accountability culture that is rendering more and more children "unready." □

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